

# Shakespeare and the Classics

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This year the world celebrates 400 years since the death of one of its greatest playwrights, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was also a poet and found inspiration in classical literature for his poetry and plays. Here, *Omnibus* gives you a taste of his narrative poem about the legendary Lucretia by showing how its heroine's looking at a painting of the Sack of Troy makes its readers see her suffering differently.

Shakespeare was (probably) a grammar school boy, educated at what is now King Edward VI School in Stratford-upon-Avon. Although the pupil records are lost, we have a good deal of information about what was studied there and at other grammar schools in the sixteenth century. The core texts were Cicero, Vergil, Ovid, and Horace, with Juvenal, Persius, Lucan, and others sometimes added. Boys progressed to Greek after mastering Latin: the New Testament was favoured reading, along with Lucian, Homer, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Hesiod, Aesop, and Euripides.

So a grammar school education took one a long way in reading the classics. In any case, this was an age of enormous activity in the production of translations into English from both Greek and Latin – and the translations were themselves often masterpieces. Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses* appeared in 1565; the first edition of North's translation of Plutarch in 1579; Chapman's Homer (Keats's favourite) between 1598 and 1616. Philemon Holland, another grammar school product (King Edward VI Chelmsford), was a one-man translation machine, producing versions of the whole of Livy (1600), Pliny the Elder (1601), Plutarch's *Moral Essays* (1603), Suetonius (1606), and Ammianus Marcellinus (1609). No one who could read needed to be ignorant of classical learning – not only Shakespeare but many of his audience clearly were not.

## Looking like Lucrece

With this in mind, consider Shakespeare's early narrative poem, published in 1594, *Lucrece*. The opening prose 'Argument', or summary, tells the story of the ancient Roman heroine Lucretia, the wife of Collatinus. While on campaign at the

siege of Ardea with, among others, the king's son Sextus Tarquinius, Collatinus boasted of his wife's virtue and beauty. Sextus became obsessed with her, and visited her while Collatinus was away (this is where the poetic version of the story which follows the Argument begins). He demanded that she sleep with him and when she refused he threatened to rape her, kill her, and make it look as though she had been committing adultery with a slave, which would ruin her reputation as well as ending her life. As she hesitates over this horrible choice he rapes her and then leaves.

In the poem Lucrece's agony is described at length; in the Argument she immediately sends messengers to her husband and father, who brings with him Brutus, a cousin of the Tarquins. She explains what has happened and then kills herself; Brutus takes her body to Rome and puts it on display; and public revulsion at Sextus' actions enables him and Lucrece's menfolk to expel the Tarquins. There are a number of uneasy tensions implicit in this story: is it a story about the demise of Rome's early kings and the beginning of the Roman republic or about a rape victim? For historians Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, it was the former; for the poet Ovid, in the *Fasti*, it was the latter. Shakespeare's own prose and verse emphasize different aspects. The tensions remain unresolved, as in all the best poetry.

Lucrece laments at length, referring to another classical rape victim, Philomela. When exhaustion sets in, 'Pausing for means to mourn some newer way' (line 1365), she goes to look at a picture of the Sack of Troy, described in detail by the narrator (the technical term for this kind of literary description is *ecphrasis*), and sees within it reflection of her own suffering. Many ancient texts include an *ecphra-*

*sis*, and this one is reminiscent of the passage in *Aeneid* 1 where Aeneas gazes at the sufferings of Troy depicted on the new temple of Juno at Carthage. There are two big differences, though: first, Aeneas weeps because he sees pictures of events in which he participated himself. Lucrece, on the other hand, is using the pictured events as an analogy for what she has herself suffered. Her rape has been described persistently as the capture of a city; she acknowledges and develops that metaphor when she turns in her grief to a painting of the archetypal fall of the archetypal city. And secondly, Aeneas is a man, Lucrece is a woman. If Shakespeare had wanted a model for her seeing, there are very few ancient texts where women are the viewers in an *ecphrasis*.

## Layers of looking

Shakespeare does not have to have a source for everything; but there is a passage from an author whom he later used a great deal which might have encouraged him to depict Lucrece gazing at a picture of Troy. In Plutarch's *Brutus* (the life of Julius Caesar's assassin), Brutus' wife Portia also seeks out a painting, in her case to comfort her distress at parting with her husband. In North's translation of 1579:

*There Porcia, being ready to depart from her husband Brutus, and to return to Rome, did what she could to dissemble the grief and sorrow she felt at her heart: but a certain painted table (= tablet) bewrayed (= betrayed) her in the end, although until that time she shewed (showed) always a constant and patient mind. The device of the table was taken out of the Greek stories, how Andromache accompanied her husband Hector when he went out of the city of Troy to go to the wars, and how Hector delivered her his little son, and how her eyes were never off him. Porcia seeing this picture, and likening herself to be in the same case, she fell a-weeping: and coming thither oftentimes in a day to see it, she wept still.*

The Andromache reference is to *Iliad* 6, where Hector finds her looking out for him on the walls; as Shakespeare's heroine continues to gaze at the painting in *Lucrece*, the same scene is alluded to obliquely (1429–35) before she focuses in on the figure of Hecuba, the mother of Hector and wife of King Priam. There are striking differences between the Shakespeare and Plutarch, as well as similarities, which reflect the contrast in situations. Lucrece addresses her picture passionately and eloquently, lamenting on behalf of the silent Hecuba, whereas Portia weeps silently and the picture is conceived as betraying her, almost as if it could speak. This is in tune with Portia's character throughout the *Brutus*. The keynote of her presentation is silence and restraint: she establishes her trustworthiness for her husband by wounding herself in secret and saying nothing until she becomes very ill; she alone knows in advance that Brutus will assassinate Caesar in the Senate, but keeps the secret, and she commits suicide by swallowing hot coals and keeping her mouth firmly shut. Lucrece, on the other hand, will attain her bitter triumph not through silence but through speech, through telling her menfolk what she has suffered. Portia's eyes are fixed on the painting, Andromache's on Hector; Lucrece's gaze dwells longest on Hecuba, as the painted figure regards her dead husband Priam. All these other women outlive their husbands, but Lucrece will not.

In Plutarch, Portia is watched in turn by Acilius, a friend of Brutus, and he and Brutus discuss her similarity to Andromache in a commentary on her actions. Lucrece is alone, but is a commentator on the picture and, as such, encourages the readers of the poem not only to picture her in front of the painting but simultaneously to see the picture with her (a much more detailed description than the Plutarchan one, which is left delicately vague): 'So Lucrece, set a-work, sad tales doth tell To pencilled pensiveness, and coloured sorrow; She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow' (1496–8). Lucrece even looks for someone who is not in the picture, notably Helen, whose private life has caused such public misery – a clear analogy for Sextus Tarquinius, whose private misconduct will lead to the end of monarchy as well as Lucrece's own death (1478–84). Helen's 'rape' – the word is used only twice in the body of the poem – is referred to earlier, at 1369, but here Lucrece views it not as a rape but as an adultery, an ambiguity which reflects her own (we feel, unjust) self-blame which will lead her to kill herself despite her family's reassurance that she has done nothing wrong. Finally, she sees the figure of Sinon, who assists in the capture of Troy by pretending to be a Greek defector. He is compa-

rable to Sextus Tarquinius because Sextus Tarquinius used a similar stratagem, narrated in Ovid's *Fasti* 2 just before the narrative of Lucretia, to capture the city of Gabii. At this point the likeness of the pictured situation to her own becomes so great that it is unbearable, and she attacks the painting. The narrator's final comment before the messenger returns with her family thus rings ironically: 'It easeth some, though none it ever cured, To think their dolour others have endured' (1581–2).

### Ways of seeing

On the one hand, all that looking at the picture has achieved is filling in time; Lucrece's situation has not changed, any more than looking at the picture in Plutarch changes Portia's circumstances. What is achieved by Shakespeare's painting of a picture of the Sack of Troy in words, however, is a deepening of the reader's understanding of Lucrece's character, and of the particular anguish of her situation vis-à-vis the situations of other ancient heroines. That indeed tends to be the function of the *ecphrasis* in any ancient text – not to change the fundamentals of the narrative but to illuminate the narrative by showing readers how to view it and its protagonists – and Shakespeare clearly fully appreciated the advantages of using this classical technique.

### Further reading

Anyone interested in this subject should read Colin Burrow's wonderful book *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* (OUP 2013). The same author's edition of Shakespeare: *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford World's Classics, 2002) also contains excellent discussion of every aspect of *Lucrece*, including its classical background.

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